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Ekphrastic Poetry and the Middle Passage: Recent Encounters in the Black Atlantic*

CARL PLASA

Introduction: Shifting the Perspective

In “Hayden in the Archive” (2010), Elizabeth Alexander looks back affectionately to the earlier African American poet whom her title names, imagining him absorbed in the painstaking labours of historical research:

Stoop-shouldered, worrying the pages,
index finger moving down the log,
column by column of faded ink.

Blood from a turnip, this
protagonist-less
Middle Passage.

Does the log yield lyric? (ll. 1-7)

Here the question with which these lines end is a rhetorical one: the “log” and “slavers’ meticulous records” (l. 8) over which Robert Hayden broods do indeed “yield lyric” (l. 7) in the fragmentary late-Modernist shape of “Middle Passage” (1945; rev. 1962), still rightly considered the most important poem to confront the historical catastrophe at its heart.

For other poets writing in Hayden’s wake, by contrast, it is not so much the textual as the visual dimensions of the transatlantic slave trade’s archive that provide the occasion for utterance, as most power-

*For debates inspired by this article, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debplasa0242.htm>>.

fully illustrated by David Dabydeen in “Turner” (1994), a 783-line poem inspired by Joseph Mallord William Turner’s *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On* (1840). This ambitious—not to say audacious—text has stimulated extensive and lively critical debates about the uses of ekphrasis as a vehicle for reflecting on the slave trade and its legacies,¹ but, since the time of its first publication over two decades ago, a number of other important Black Atlantic poems in which ekphrasis meets the Middle Passage have been produced. This essay analyses three of the most recent salient examples of this trend, all of which have to date attracted little or no critical attention: Elizabeth Alexander’s “Islands Number Four” (2001), Olive Senior’s “A Superficial Reading” (2004), and Honorée Fanonne Jeffers’s “Portrait of Dido Elizabeth Belle Lindsay, Great-Niece of Lord Mansfield, and Her Cousin, Lady Elizabeth Murray, c. 1779 (by unknown artist)” (2011).²

By bringing these three texts together, the essay enables us, in the first instance, to gain a sense of how the deployment of the ekphrastic genre has developed in the hands of twenty-first century poets wishing to traverse anew the ground of Dabydeen’s pioneering experimental vision. More significantly, perhaps, it simultaneously builds on the work that “Turner” has elicited over the years by further correcting the biases intrinsic to much of the existing criticism on ekphrastic poetry, for which the dominant analytic paradigm remains that of texts where both the poet’s gaze—and its object—are white.³

Looking Beyond the Visible: Elizabeth Alexander’s “Islands Number Four”

Alexander’s “Islands Number Four” was originally commissioned for *Words for Images: A Gallery of Poems* (2001), a book which, as one of its editors, Joanna Weber, puts it, “bring[s] poets who were once students back to the [...] campus” at Yale University to “interact” with the “objects” (Hollander and Weber ix) housed in the University’s Art Gallery. One such object is Agnes Martin’s *Islands No. 4*, an abstract

expressionist painting produced c. 1961 and positioned in the book on the right-hand page directly opposite Alexander's twenty-five line poem (see fig. 1). This small work (it is just 37.8 centimetres square) features twelve "oval capsules," each traversed six times by the "horizontal line" that, as Weber explains, is one of Martin's hallmarks and "encased in a grid" in such a way as to resemble "an archipelago of islands organized as neatly as if they were in an ice cube tray" (Hollander and Weber 82).

Alexander responds to this thought-provoking minimalist picture in her poem's enigmatic first strophe:

1.

Agnes Martin, *Islands Number Four*,
Repeated ovals on a grid, what appears
To be perfect is handmade, disturbed.
Tobacco brown saturates canvas to burlap,
Clean form from a distance, up close, her hand.
All wrack and bramble to oval and grid.
Hollows in the body, containers for grief.
What looks to be perfect is not perfect.

Odd oval portholes that flood with light. (ll. 1-9)

As the poem continues, it becomes clear that Alexander is doing something far more daring and complex than simply providing an ekphrastic gloss on another's artistic creation, moving outside the frame of what is directly visible to an engagement with an image that the reader cannot see on the page and that, at first glance at least, could hardly be further removed from Martin's. This ghostly image is that of the Liverpool slaver, the *Brookes* (see fig. 2), abruptly introduced at the beginning of the poem's second strophe:

2.

Description of a Slave Ship. 1789:
Same imperfect ovals, calligraphic hand.
At a distance, pattern. Up close, bodies
Doubled and doubled, serried and stacked
In the manner of galleries in a church.

In full ships on their sides or on each other.
 Isle of woe, two-by-two, spoon-fashion,
Not unfrequently found dead in the morning.
 Slave-ships, the not-pure, imperfect ovals,
 Portholes through which they would never see home.
The flesh rubbed off their shoulders, elbows, hips.
 Barracoon, sarcophagus, indestructible grief
 Nesting in the hollows of the abdomen.
 The slave-ship empty, its cargo landed
 And sold for twelve ounces of gold a-piece

Or gone overboard. Islands. Aftermath. (ll. 10-25)

On more considered inspection, however, the differences between these two images—the seen and the unseen, the modern and the archival, Martin's painting and *Description*—prove to be not quite so pronounced. Such an effect is curiously appropriate, given that it is brought about by the way in which, in Alexander's poem, the meanings of the two images themselves change as the distance from which they are contemplated is reduced.

In the case of Martin's picture, the regimented set of "Repeated ovals on a grid" (l. 2) of which it is composed initially gives the impression of "Clean form from a distance" but, when observed "up close," reveals the traces of its production and, in particular, the artist's "hand" (l. 5.)—the shaping instrument which at once "disturb[s]" (l. 5) the mechanical symmetries of the "canvas" (l. 4) and sullies them with the touch of the human. Such subtle adulterations of the depersonalized effect for which the artist seems to strive are registered, in "Islands," by its own play of subtly imperfect repetition. This begins with the poem's title (reappearing in italics in the poem's first line), which quietly alters Martin's *Islands No. 4* to "Islands Number Four" and is continued in the minor discrepancies of phrase that, for instance, recast "what appears / To be perfect is handmade" (ll. 2-3) as "What looks to be perfect is not perfect" (l. 8). But as well as detecting the presence of Martin's hand behind the apparent geometrical purities of "oval and grid" (l. 6), the poem's speaker begins to invest the elusive images she sees with her own humanizing meaning: Martin's gridded ovals are interpreted as "Hollows in the body" which are

subsequently refigured as “containers for grief” (l. 7) before finally turning into mysterious “portholes that flood with light” (l. 9).

The terms in which the speaker constructs the twelve abstract forms populating Martin’s picture might seem somewhat arbitrary, but become less so when apprehended from the perspective of the poem’s second strophe, in which—as already noted—the text shifts its ground from the realms of abstract art to those of abolitionist iconography and *Description*, an image more famous even than the painting by Turner that so enthralls Dabydeen. Here the speaker once more gains insight into the visual materials with which she deals by means of an interpretative double-take. When first observed “At a distance” (l. 12), the image of the *Brookes* appears to feature the “Same imperfect ovals” (l. 11) as characterize Martin’s work and to be organized in terms of a similar “pattern” (l. 12). Yet when examined “Up close,” these forms show themselves in fact as captured African “bodies” (l. 12) brusquely crammed into the different apartments of the slaver’s lower deck—“Doubled and doubled, serried and stacked” (l. 13), as Alexander puts it—with the adult male slaves chain-hyphenated together, “two-by-two” (l. 16) for good measure. Martin’s painting, in other words, provides the speaker with a way of approaching the representation of the slave ship while the latter provides a reciprocal frame of reference for interpreting the painting and understanding the speaker’s response to it: the painting, it thus emerges, is haunted not only by the vestigial trace of the artist’s hand but also by the spectral memory of a disturbing history, with the two images in the poem entering into dialogue with one another. In this way, Martin’s work lends strange weight to Marcus Rediker’s haunting description of “the slaver” as a kind of “ghost ship sailing on the edges of modern consciousness” (13).

It would be an exaggeration to claim that the respective parts of the poem to which these images are assigned are held together with anything like the same force as the shackled figures in *Description*, but they are certainly suggestively interlinked all the same. One way in which Alexander forges the connections is by verbal association, with

several of the terms used in the first strophe obliquely looking forward to its second by means of their resonances either with the nautical world more proper to the *Brookes* ("wrack," (l. 6); "portholes," "flood," (l. 9); and the punning "canvas," (l. 4)) or with plantation labour ("Tobacco" and "burlap," (l. 4)), while another is repetition. The repetition with slight differences of phrases is an important aspect of the poem's first strophe but ultimately something that pervades it as a whole, as particular formulations are reworked across its course: "up close, her hand" (l. 5) becomes "Up close, bodies" (l. 12), for example, and "Hollows in the body, containers for grief" (l. 7) becomes "indestructible grief / Nesting in the hollows of the abdomen" (ll. 21-22). This mosaic of phrasings and rephrasings is complemented both by the poem's phonetic order, which is dominated by the long and short "o"-sound and by its lineation, with the last line of each strophe cut adrift from the block of verse that precedes it.

The image of the *Brookes* that Alexander invokes is far more overtly charged in a political sense than Martin's *Islands* and absorbs more of the poem's imaginative energy (receiving sixteen lines as opposed to just nine), not least because it raises a number of questions about the interplay between verbal and visual modes of representation in which Alexander is herself interested. It was originally produced and circulated by William Elford and the Plymouth Chapter of the British Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade in November 1788 but quickly reappeared in several further editions published the following year in London, Philadelphia and New York and was copied and distributed by the thousand.⁴ While these four versions of the image are all accompanied by an extensive written commentary, what is striking about the most widely reproduced London version is the way in which it recalibrates the ratio of visual to verbal materials. This iteration of the print endows those visual materials with a much greater technical sophistication and complexity than is manifested by its three cognates, offering some seven views of the slaver (rather than the single view to which the other broadsides are restricted), and it also significantly reduces the amount of space available on the page

for the written text. In our own day, emphasis on the visual dimension of the *Brookes's* representation is even more extreme: the image is now extensively used (or even overused) by publishing houses to promote and sell books about the slave trade by novelists, historians and literary critics but invariably appears in this commercial context shorn of writing altogether (even as, ironically, what it advertises is precisely textual).⁵

Perhaps one way of accounting for such privileging of the visual is through the assumption that images are ultimately more powerful than words as a means to convey the trials the slaves underwent during the Middle Passage. As we shall see, such an assumption is one which Alexander's poem will significantly challenge but it certainly appears to underpin Thomas Clarkson's narrative of how the image of the *Brookes* both came about and was subsequently refined, as told in his *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade by the British Parliament* (1808):

The [Plymouth] committee also in this interval brought out their famous print of the plan and section of a slave-ship; which was designed to give the spectator an idea of the sufferings of the Africans in the Middle Passage, and this so familiarly, that he might instantly pronounce upon the miseries experienced there. The committee at Plymouth had been the first to suggest the idea; but that in London had now improved it. As this print seemed to make an instantaneous impression of horror upon all who saw it, and as it was therefore very instrumental, in consequence of the wide circulation given it, in serving the cause of the injured Africans, I have given the reader a copy of it in the annexed plate. (2: 111)

Here it is noticeable that Clarkson—writing in the immediate aftermath to the slave trade's abolition in 1807—defines the recipient of the “copy” of the “famous print” he is discussing as a “reader,” whereas, when he reminisces about the preabolitionist period when the print was an instrument of political change, he uses a different nomenclature. In this more urgent context, the recipient is a collective “spectator,” exposed “so familiarly” to the “sufferings of the Africans in the Middle Passage” that “he” “instantly” becomes an authority upon

their "miseries," receiving an "impression of horror" that is, once again, "instantaneous."

There is no doubt that the image of the *Brookes* is a shocking one, confronting its beholder with a vision of the slave trade which is hard to forget. Yet as much as it purveys "horror," the image to some degree also screens or detracts from it, particularly with regard to those endlessly duplicated "bodies" to which Alexander's text alludes. While these are so arranged in *Description* as to give the viewer an overwhelming sense of the Middle Passage's claustrophobic atmosphere, they seem strangely self-contained, especially with regard to the corporeal secretions that would be released during the Atlantic voyage. Yet even as this sense of sickening bodily discharge is thus expelled from *Description* in visual terms, it is communicated verbally in the personal abolitionist testimony of the slave-ship surgeon, Alexander Falconbridge, whom *Description* quotes in its fourth and final column: "The deck, that is, the floor of [the slaves'] rooms," Falconbridge recalls, "was so covered with the blood and mucus which had proceeded from them in consequence of the flux, that it resembled a slaughter-house." Word supplements image, that is, filling out its lack.

Together with their aura of self-containment, the enslaved bodies that *Description* renders visually appear surprisingly whole and vigorous—as if somehow uncorrupted by the often fatal illnesses to which they would normally be prone and which, as *Description* lists them, not only include the "flux" (or dysentery), but also "small-pox, measles [...] and other contagious disorders." These impressions are corrected, however, both by *Description*'s written text and Alexander's poem, which remembers and incorporates three fragments of that text, using a similar kind of collage technique to that deployed in Hayden's "Middle Passage" and combining this with an italicized type perhaps suggestive of the sideways position slaves were routinely obliged to take up: "In full ships on their sides or on each other" (l. 15); "Not unfrequently found dead in the morning" (l. 17); and "The flesh rubbed off their shoulders, elbows, hips" (l. 20).

This technique extends beyond *Description* to a version of the *Brookes* broadside to which Alexander alludes less obviously, *Stowage of the British Slave Ship 'Brookes' Under the Regulated Slave Trade Act of 1788* (see fig. 3). In this contemporary etching (probably produced in 1788), the amount of written text provided is drastically reduced from the 2,400 words estimated by Rediker to be included in *Description* (317), while at the same time being more freely interspersed among the visual materials (rather than fixed beneath them). One feature of this writing is its being inscribed in what Alexander defines, in the first of her three allusions to the image, as a "calligraphic hand" (l. 11) whose flowing elegance not only collapses the distinction between word and image, but also clashes deliberately with the grotesque realities it records, as, for example, in the comments about the number of persons the *Brookes* transported prior to the Regulation Act. As this broadside discloses in the "Note" tucked into its top-right corner, the slaver "had at one time carried as many as 609 Slaves," reaching this capacity "by taking some out of Irons & locking them spoonwise (to use the technical term) that is by stowing one within the distended legs of the other." Such a startling contrast is evident elsewhere in *Stowage*, particularly in the statement, located this time in the centre of the page in bold upper-case font, of how **"ADDITIONAL SLAVES"** would sometimes be congregated **"ROUND THE WINGS OR SIDES"** of the *Brookes's* **"LOWER DECK BY MEANS OF PLATFORMS OR SHELVES (IN THE MANNER OF GALLERIES IN A CHURCH)."** These two snippets of information provide the basis for Alexander's other two allusions, as she revises "spoonwise" into "spoon-fashion" (l. 16) and alters the visual aspect of the parenthetical phrase just quoted, so that it reappears in her text in the standard italic font which, as previously indicated, she uses at other points: "*in the manner of galleries in a church*" (l. 14).

In reclaiming such fragments from the archive of representations to which the *Brookes* has given rise, Alexander contests the primacy of the visual mode, placing an imaginative counter-faith in the ability of the written word to act as an effective conduit of historical memory.

Yet she is not content with simply letting that word speak for itself, as it were, but concerned instead to augment its powers, doing so no more strikingly than in the arresting figuration of the *Brookes* as “sarcophagus” (l. 21), an entity defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as a “kind of stone reputed among the Greeks to have the property of consuming the flesh of dead bodies deposited in it, and consequently used for coffins” (“sarcophags” *n.* 1). In Alexander, that is, the flesh of Clarkson’s “injured Africans” (2: 111) is not just excoriated by its frictional movement against the “chains” and “bare boards” to which *Description* refers, but actively eaten away from the bodies of those who do not survive such ordeals.

Ultimately, however, the written word can no more do justice to the truth of the slave trade than the visual image, as Alexander’s poem would seem perhaps to recognize on reaching its conclusion. At this point, the “slave-ship” is “empty, its cargo landed / And sold for twelve ounces of gold a-piece” (ll. 23-24)—a sum which incidentally looks back or across to the dozen silvery ovals featured in Martin’s painting—even as other slaves are said, in the poem’s last line, mysteriously to have “gone overboard” (l. 25). In deploying so nondescript a phrase, Alexander’s poem both hints, ironically, at the imperfections of the linguistic medium it elsewhere affirms and leaves itself no option but to come to a sudden halt with two one-word sentences—“Islands. Aftermath.” (l. 25) These respectively return the poem to its beginning (and the painting that was its original impetus), restarting the processes of re-vision with which the poem is preoccupied.

“Islands Number Four” is thus a poem in which allusion plays a central role, enabling Alexander to expand her range of reference beyond Martin to encompass representations of the *Brookes* in which the visual and the verbal are intermixed in complex ways. The technique of allusion similarly predominates in the second text for consideration, Senior’s “A Superficial Reading” and has a similarly expansive effect, as the poem enters into a dialogue with a variety of texts additional to the image that explicitly inspires it.

Fathoming Allusion in Olive Senior's "A Superficial Reading"

This twenty-seven line poem was first published in *Mangrove* in 2004, but reappears in *Shell* (77-78), a volume with which, as Senior tells us in her "Author's Note," she "wanted to be done [...] by 2007," so that it would coincide with the bicentennial of "the abolition of the slave trade by Britain" (95). It is the poem's timely re-emergence at this symbolic moment that gives it one further link to the abolition-conscious "Islands." Where the poem dramatically differs from "Islands," however, is in the fact that the visual material to which it responds does not take the form of harrowing images of slave ships but is an ostensibly seductive portrait, in which the figure of an individual (female) slave is not only brought into view but also juxtaposed with that of her white mistress. In taking its stimulus from such an image, "A Superficial Reading" signals an interest in the dynamics of power between black and white females that is not part of Alexander's text but that will also be crucial to the poem by Jeffers to be discussed later on.

The first of the allusions to feature in Senior's text appears in the brief parenthetical headnote situated just before the poem proper begins and is in fact what might be called a misallusion: "*An eighteenth-century painting of the titled English lady and her black child slave*" (77; italics in original). While the information provided here usefully alerts the reader to the poem's ekphrastic genre and the inequalities of race (as well as class and age) that mark the relationship between its two key figures, it is in other ways not entirely accurate or helpful, since the painting in question is neither strictly of eighteenth-century provenance nor of a lady who is English. Instead it is Pierre Mignard's 1682 portrait of Louise de K  roualle (1649-1734), Duchess of Portsmouth and mistress to King Charles II (see fig. 4). The allusive surface in this case is, in other words, a duplicitous one and no doubt playfully so, given the careful historical erudition which invariably underpins Senior's *oeuvre*. Senior's headnote performs additional mischief by referring to Mignard's sitter as "*titled*" while failing to disclose what her official appellation actually is. In this way, Mignard's

Duchess finds herself reduced to the same anonymity as characterizes the young female slave kneeling at her side. The latter is visually present in the portrait itself, of course, but altogether effaced by the imposing legend the portrait bears: *Louise de Kéroualle, Duchess of Portsmouth*.

Just as the true identity of Mignard's painting is somewhat obfuscated by the headnote, so the image itself is not immediately available to the reader's gaze at the poem's outset. In contrast to the situation with "Islands," it is not visible alongside the text, but positioned on the reverse side of the page on which the poem's first eighteen lines are printed, where it is reproduced in black and white, rather than the sumptuous colours of the original:

Turn the page and revel in the surface opulence
of moiré silk, of creamware, pearlware, skin.
The shell-like ear behind the torque of ringlets,

the black pearl eyes. (ll. 1-4)

If the idea of "surface opulence" implies a deeper impoverishment—a certain moral emptiness harboured inside the shell of the Duchess's material affluence and outward beauty—such a notion is compounded by the painting itself, which shows a slave-girl not merely purveying the exotic spoils of empire (in this case sprigs of red coral and large pearls contained in a conch shell), but being one such spoil in her own right: she is finely attired in a green dress and "owned" (l. 15) by the Duchess in the same way as the "pearl choker" (l. 11) that has been "loaned [her] for the occasion" (l. 12) of the portrait's composition. The irony here is that even as the Duchess "does not really notice" the slave and treats her as "an accessory to fashion" (ll. 5, 11)—a phrase in which "fashion" is both noun and verb—the white woman is herself rendered in terms that suggest how she too is less a consuming subject than an object for consumption: her "shell-like ear" and "black pearl eyes" mirror the far-fetched treasures the slave brings her and the arm with which she "embrac[es]," without "shel-

tering" (l. 6), her black minion is likened to "cold marble" (l. 7)—marmoreal not maternal.

Another particularly significant instance of this process of objectification occurs at the start of the poem when the Duchess's "skin" is likened to "creamware" and "pearlware" (l. 2), both of which are types of pottery manufactured and popularized by Josiah Wedgwood (1730-95). Wedgwood also designed the well-known jasperware medallion used to advance the abolitionist campaign (see fig. 5), and by thus gesturing towards him the poem exposes the Duchess to another irony (albeit one that is self-evidently anachronistic in a strict historical sense), since the Wedgwood medallion was widely adopted by women during the abolitionist era as a modish accoutrement and so might well have been something the slave-owning Duchess would have found appealing. As Clarkson recollects in his *History*:

Of the ladies, several wore [the medallions] in bracelets, and others had them fitted up in an ornamental manner for their hair. At length, the taste for wearing them became general; and thus fashion, which usually confines itself to worthless things, was seen for once in the honourable office of promoting the cause of justice, humanity, and freedom. (2: 192)

The poem's relatively oblique evocation of Wedgwood in the opening stanza's comparison of epidermal to ceramic surfaces becomes more direct in the description of Mignard's child-slave in stanza three: "You kneel and the painter / collapses your upper body into a sign: / a small black triangle" (ll. 7-9). Like the earlier reference to the "triangle" of the Duchess's "body" (ll. 5, 6) coldly enclosing the slave's in stanza two, Senior's geometric language here is suggestive of the commonplace reductionism which, in figuring the transatlantic slave trade as "triangular," "collapses" (l. 8) its rough trajectories into a manageable mathematics. At the same time, Senior's stress on the slave's "kneel[ing]" (l. 7) posture brings the poem back to the Wedgwood medallion, which displays its own kneeling (or rather half-kneeling) slave. That said, there are some obvious differences between the two enslaved figures, the most notable being that, in the image presented by the medallion, the slave's hands are clasped in supplica-

tion and shackled together, whereas in Mignard's painting they are not just unshackled but gift-bearing and the slave herself seems to be engaged in an act of worship as she gazes up smilingly at her unresponsive owner.

According to Joseph Roach, Mignard's portrait—despite its seductiveness, or perhaps because of it—is a “deeply disturbing paean to imperial commodification” (130) in which slavery is “domesticated, privatized [and] trivialized” (128) and its brutal realities rendered invisible. While such realities do not come any nearer to being disclosed by Senior's poem—something that clearly distinguishes it from Alexander's—they are nonetheless discernible via allusive channels, as, for example, in the detail of that choker that “collars” (l. 12) the slave-girl and seemingly “separates” her “head” from her “body” (l. 13). As the poem's speaker puts it, this adornment is an *aide-mémoire*, “reminding” the girl of “an earlier truncation” (l. 14). Here the most obvious historical reference is to the beheading of King Charles I during the English Civil War in 1649 but, in literary terms, the allusion is to Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* (1688). In this novella set in Coramantien and Surinam (and including a Middle Passage vignette of its own), the violence of slavery Mignard masks is fully exhibited, whether in the climactic dismemberment of the eponymous hero that takes place in the novella's penultimate paragraph, which some critics read as an allegory for Charles I's own execution (see Brown 57-58; Doyle 103), or Oronoko's despairing decapitation of his pregnant African wife, Imoinda.

The relative position of slave to mistress in Mignard's composition gives visual expression to a hierarchy of race in which the black female body is marginal and the white central, with the latter also portrayed as literally superior to (and much fuller than) the former. Such a hierarchy is both treated ironically by Senior and supplemented by the hierarchy of knowledge obtaining between her poem's speaker and the classically posed Duchess, with the one first of all laying claim to an understanding of the slave that eludes the other. For the Duchess, as the speaker punningly puts it, the attendant slave is “a page

she cannot read or write on" (l. 10),⁶ whereas for the speaker herself the slave is somewhat closer to an open book, whose meaning can, it seems, be confidently grasped and whose signs of capture appear in the repeated declaratives of the speaker's language: "you / are a page," "You are / an accessory to fashion," "you are owned," and "You / exist merely to make her seem more luminous" (ll. 9-10, 10-11, 15, 15-16). At the same time, the speaker asserts a higher knowledge over the Duchess that pertains to the Duchess herself and that is perhaps better described as a type of foreknowledge. Such prescience is first articulated in the poem when the speaker addresses the slave and tells her that her mistress "does not know that perfection is shadowed / always, like a phantom limb" (ll. 17-18), using a phrasing that is itself foreshadowed in the work of Senior's fellow Caribbean author, Wilson Harris. The allusion, in particular, is to the terms in which Harris conceptualizes the memory of the Middle Passage, as it lives on in Caribbean cultural practice, specifically limbo. Contemplating this popular dance-form in "History, Fable and Myth in the Caribbean and the Guianas," an influential essay published in 1970, Harris writes that it "reflects a certain kind of gateway to or threshold of a new world and the dislocation of a chain of miles. It is—in some ways—the archetypal sea-change stemming from Old Worlds and it is legitimate, I feel, to pun on limbo as a kind of shared phantom limb" (157).

Insofar as they look back not only to Harris's essay but also Mignard's canvas, however, these lines have the added effect of rendering the slave's body paradoxically insubstantial, diminishing it to the status of a shadow whose *raison d'être* is merely to augment the radiance of the Duchess's figure. Equally, though, they suggest that the white woman's corporeal "perfection" is itself insubstantial or phantasmal. It is somehow intrinsically marred and, as the poem goes on to prophesy, will in the end suffer eclipse:

She does not know
about inversion and that the right hand never
shows what the left is doing. So that your prop,
that fake offering of shell like Pandora's box

could spill and pearl her skin like a sickness,
bloom like stigmata. (ll. 18-23)

The “sickness” that threatens to “pearl” (l. 22) or decorate the Duchess’s white skin is specifically a venereal one,⁷ as is suggested by the location of the Pandoran “shell” (l. 21) from which it “bloom[s]” (l. 23) in Mignard’s composition.⁸ As Roach points out, this location is not accidental but informed by a deliberate erotic symbolism: “Placed between the richly brocaded and slightly parted thighs” of Mignard’s Duchess, the “cornucopia of pearls” the slave is holding “opens up,” he writes, “like the lips of a lush pudendum” (128).

The Duchess’s ignorance of the illness she will come to suffer is compounded by her ignorance of its consequences for her standing in her royal paramour’s affections and, especially, the way in which, as the speaker surmises, she will be duly replaced by her own slave as object of the King’s desire, as the poem’s sexual hierarchies undergo an ironic “inversion” or reversal. As the speaker anticipates, addressing the slave in the poem’s final stanza:

She does not know you are
the Sable Venus-in-waiting, the black pearl
poised to be borne on cusp of emptied shell. (ll. 25-27)

Here the poem adds the final piece to its allusive puzzle by reaching beyond the historical frame of Mignard’s late-seventeenth-century portrait and forward to Thomas Stothard’s “The Voyage of the Sable Venus, from Angola to the West Indies,” an extravagant painterly evocation of the Middle Passage commissioned by the Jamaican planter, Bryan Edwards, over one hundred years later. While this production has not survived its own voyage through time, it is included as an engraving by William Grainger in the second edition of Edwards’s *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies* (1794), where it appears alongside the similarly titled poem that prompted it, Isaac Teale’s “The Sable Venus; An Ode” (1765). As Regulus Allen summarizes (assuming the engraver’s art to

be faithful to its source), Stothard's painting "depicts an African woman riding on a shell chariot drawn by dolphins [and] accompanied by Neptune bearing a British flag, Triton blowing on a conch shell, and a host of amoretti" (680). Stothard's image is thus enlisted into Senior's poem as an "offering" that is just as "fake" (l. 21) as Mignard's: it performs an artistic sea-change upon the raw materials of the slave trade which not only recasts them into frivolous classical form but also, crucially, disavows the sexual vulnerability of the female slave by imagining her as a divine presence, a goddess able to exert the very control over her white masters which she would in fact lack.

How we read Senior's allusion depends on how her poem's speaker reads Stothard. If she reads him with a critical awareness of the way in which his painting falsifies the realities of the Middle Passage, the implication is that she is not mocking the Duchess's ignorance of the reversal of sexual fortunes awaiting her (and her slave) but lamenting it as a barrier to an enlightened alliance between white and black females, yoked together as victims of different kinds of white male sexual exploitation. If, on the other hand, she reads Stothard without such awareness—reads him superficially, that is—the speaker simply reveals the limits of her own knowledge. The transformation of the slave in Mignard's painting into the Sable Venus in Stothard's might represent a triumph of black beauty over white but does so at a dreadful cost.

A Different View: Interracial Sisterhood in Honorée Fanonne Jeffers's *"Portrait of Dido Elizabeth Belle Lindsay, Great-Niece of Lord Mansfield, and Her Cousin, Lady Elizabeth Murray, c. 1779 (by unknown artist)"*

The final poem in this essay's ekphrastic trilogy is Jeffers's *"Portrait of Dido Elizabeth Belle Lindsay, Great-Niece of Lord Mansfield, and Her Cousin, Lady Elizabeth Murray, c. 1779 (by unknown artist)"* This text, so far available only online, is part of Jeffers's *Age of Phillis*, a work-in-

progress dedicated to the life and revolutionary times of its eponymous heroine, the African-born slave-poet, Phillis Wheatley, who was brought to Boston aged between seven and eight in 1761. As its lengthy title indicates, however, the poem has less to do with Wheatley herself than with the anonymous double portrait of the two women it names (see fig. 6). As Paula Byrne observes, this image is both unique and important because it is, “as far as we know, the only portrait of its era to show a white girl and a black one together in a sisterly pose” (4) and hence offers a quite different interracial vision to that laid out in the more conventionally hierarchical painting by Mignard.

If the suggestion of interracial sorority makes the image unusual, the painting assumes an even greater strangeness and significance when the complicated and fragmentary history linking its two principals is taken into account. As Christine Kenyon Jones summarizes:

Painted in the late 1770s by an unknown artist, the portrait shows two great-nieces of Lord Mansfield, who was Lord Chief Justice of England from 1756 to 1788. On the right is Lady Elizabeth Murray, daughter of Lord Mansfield’s nephew and heir, the seventh Viscount Stormont. Lady Elizabeth was born in 1760 and brought up by Lord Mansfield and his wife after her mother died when she was a young child. Dido Elizabeth Bell, on the left, was the illegitimate daughter of another of Lord Mansfield’s nephews, Captain John Lindsay, and a probably enslaved black woman, Maria Bell. Dido was born in 1761 and was also brought up by Lord and Lady Mansfield from a young age. The girls are shown in the grounds of Lord Mansfield’s house, Kenwood, in Hampstead, North London, and there is a representation of Kenwood’s famous view of St. Paul’s Cathedral in the bottom left-hand corner. The painting is now kept in Scone Palace, Perth, Scotland, but it was displayed at Kenwood in 2007 in an exhibition marking the two-hundredth anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade in Britain. (n. p.)⁹

One way to approach Jeffers’s interpretation of this anonymous picture is with her poem’s opening couplet, which, as well as being typically brief, establishes a striking tension between content and form: “Dido moves quickly— / as from the Latin *anime* [*sic*]” (italics in original). While the first line of the couplet emphasizes Dido’s swift-

ness and overall vivacity, her movement no sooner commences than it is impeded by the end-stopped second line, particularly with the trisyllabic *anime* (presumably an erratum for “anima,” glossed in the even briefer third line as “Breath or soul”), and it is notable that by as early as line six Dido is not moving at all but “standing.” This tension between movement and restraint pervades the poem as a whole, which regularly breaks up its own syntactic flow with couplets (like this first one) that are complete sentences and individual lines that are similarly self-enclosed and sometimes consist merely of a single word.

The poem’s alternation between the impulse towards movement and the impulse towards containment is consistent with the image from which it takes its inspiration, in which the white girl detains her literally more dashing counterpart with her outstretched right hand and seems, as Byrne suggests, to be “pulling her into the frame” (3). This gesture is ambiguous and ambivalent, as mixed in its messages as Dido is mixed in her race. One means of construing Elizabeth’s action is as a sign of the white possession or coercion of the black body on which slavery and the slave trade are predicated, while an alternative and more cordial option is to view it as a visual expression of the emotional ties that have formed between the two figures and complement their blood relationship as half-cousins. A third possibility defines the gesture in more historically specific terms as symbolic of the ideological conflicts characterizing the late-eighteenth-century moment when the painting was produced, as forces committed to maintaining the *status quo* of the slave trade find themselves challenged by forces equally committed to its abolition: Dido strives towards a brighter future from which Elizabeth withholds her.

Such pro-slavery forces in turn presuppose the sort of everyday racism that both animates the Mignard painting discussed above and is encapsulated in a short passage from the posthumously published *Diary and Letters of His Excellency Thomas Hutchinson* (1886), which Jeffers adopts almost verbatim as her poem’s epigraph. This records Hutchinson’s impressions of a soirée he attended at Mansfield’s Kenwood home on 29 August 1779 and is thus contemporary with the

time of the painting's composition: "A Black came in after dinner and sat with the ladies [...]. He [Mansfield] calls her Dido, which I suppose is all the name she has. He knows he has been reproached for shewing a fondness for her" (2: 276). Here Dido appears simply as "A Black" (a demeaning term Hutchinson uses twice more in the course of the same entry) and, even in Mansfield's supposedly enlightened residence, once described by Ignatius Sancho as his "sweet box at Caen Wood" (274), must dine apart, an obligation attesting to her equivocal status as "neither a servant nor a fully fledged member of the family" (Bryant 28).

In the painting itself, conversely, there are hints of the racial "inversion" anticipated in "A Superficial Reading," with Dido appearing to be not just equal in height to Elizabeth but marginally to exceed her. That said, Dido's superior stature is something of a compositional illusion, fabricated by dint of the fashionable ostrich feather she sports in her Indian turban and the simple fact that her companion is seated, just as there are other aspects of the painting which quietly dispute its aura of racial progressivism. That sitting posture, for example, grants Elizabeth the leisure for which the fleet-footed Dido does not have time, one of her duties being, as Hutchinson notes, to superintend the household's "dairy [and] poultry yard" (2: 276). Similarly, the open book Elizabeth holds in her left hand and rests upon her lap is the sign of a civilized identity markedly at odds with the primitive otherness suggested by the exotic fruits Dido carries in the basket suspended from the crook of her right arm.

In Jeffers's text, the painting's ambiguities are downplayed, though certainly not eradicated, with Dido apparently restored to her racially superior position. Just as her name precedes Elizabeth's in the poem's title, so it appears as the first word in three of the poem's thirty-five lines, with Elizabeth's so placed only once. Elizabeth herself is described, in line four, as being "Beside" Dido, a word which evokes the sisterly rapport Byrne identifies and yet at the same time carries the implication that (to recall Senior) the white girl is merely an "accessory" (l. 11) to the black, rather than the other way around. In addition

to this, Jeffers both draws attention to Dido's slightly greater height and underscores its symbolic significance in lines six to seven: "Dido standing in irony— / the lowest are taller here." The irony "here," however, is at least twofold: Dido's ostensibly more elevated stance may well provocatively reverse the racial order of things that prevails in the Hutchinsonian world outside the painting's frame, but, as already noted, it depends upon the good grace of her cousin's sedentary pose.

As well as effacing Dido's individuality by referring to her simply as a "Black" (2: 276), the fastidious Hutchinson suggests that her skin colour and hair—the classic phenotypes of a supposed racial difference—are not to his taste. In a passage Jeffers does not cite but which is once again from the same diary entry, he comments that "her wool was much frizzled in her neck, but not enough to answer the large curls now in fashion," adding that he finds her "neither handsome nor genteel," though "pert enough" (2: 276). As Byrne notes, however, Dido is regarded quite differently by the one who paints her: "the viewer" of his picture, she states, is "left with little doubt that it is the black girl who has captured the imagination of the artist" (5)—living up to the meaning of one of her assorted names ("Belle" = "beautiful"). While the exact nature of the racial hierarchy between white and black in the painting may be ambiguous, the aesthetic hierarchy, in other words, is not, with Dido clearly placed above Elizabeth as the more visually pleasing and charismatic of the two figures. In this sense, the painting transgresses orthodox prejudices regarding female attractiveness as they are articulated not only in Hutchinson's localized *ad feminam* account but also in the broader contemporary context of Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785):

The first difference which strikes us is that of colour. Whether the black of the negro resides in the reticular membrane between the skin and scarf-skin, or in the scarf-skin itself; whether it proceeds from the colour of the blood, the colour of the bile, or from that of some other secretion, the difference is fixed in nature, and is as real as if its seat and cause were better known to us. And is this difference of no importance? Is it not the foundation of a greater or less share of beauty in the two races? Are not the fine mixtures of red and

white, the expressions of every passion by greater or less suffusions of colour in the one, preferable to that eternal monotony, which reigns in the countenances, that immoveable veil of black which covers all the emotions of the other race? Add to these, flowing hair, a more elegant symmetry of form, their own judgment in favour of the whites, declared by their preference of them, as uniformly as is the preference of the Oranootan for the black women over those of his own species. (145)

The transgressive sense of Dido's superior beauty which the painting communicates is replicated in Jeffers's poem, with its delectably comic figuration of Elizabeth as "a biscuit figurine in pink" (l. 5). While the colour of her attire resonates with Jefferson's "fine mixtures of red and white" (145), she herself does not benefit from the privileges which her similarly pigmented and seemingly edible skin should guarantee:

Elizabeth should provide

an unkind contrast: pretty, blond,
pale in uncovered places—

but no.

The painter worships the quickened other.

Dido, his coquette of deep-dish
dimples, his careless, bright love. (ll. 8-14)

Elizabeth's dress links her both by its colour and shape to the dome of St Paul's, shimmering hazily in the picture's far background, though it is not she but Dido whom the painter "worships" (l. 12), a term whose usage is an ironic reminder of how Dido's identity in the poem swiftly changes: at this juncture, she is associated less with the initial "soul" of the poem's third line than with the flesh that turns her into a visual feast and whose "deep-dish / dimples" (ll. 13-14) seem to promise a more profound and enduring satisfaction than the momentary sweetness of her biscuit-like companion.

In representing Dido in this way, it might be said that the painting, in another irony, is anything but transgressive, since it simply repro-

duces the conventional fantasy of the black female as readily yielding to the sexual pleasure of the white man and in so doing classifies her as just another Sable Venus. Yet it is significant that, even as Jeffers implies Dido's status as the painter's possession, she also designates her as a "coquette" (l. 13), a word whose meaning is defined by the *OED* as, "[a] woman (more or less young), who uses arts to gain the admiration and affection of men, merely for the gratification of vanity or from a desire of conquest, and without any intention of responding to the feelings aroused" ("coquette" *n.*, 1.a.).

In the eyes of the one who paints her, Dido may be coquettish, but in those of the poem's speaker, she is not so much in the position of control that this implies as vulnerable, the perils of her situation exacerbated by a youthful naïveté. As the speaker puts it, switching to an idiom that is suddenly strikingly more colloquial and modern than before:

Forget history.
She's a teenager.

We know what that means.
Cocky, stupid about reality.

No thought of babies—
feathers in her arms.

She might wave them, clearing
dead mothers from the air—

and surely, she's special—
her uncle dressed her with care,

hid her from triangles and seas
outside this walled garden. (ll. 15-26)

As the conflicting references to "babies" (l. 19) and "dead mothers" (l. 22) suggest, the "history" (l. 15) in question here is specifically that of the sexual relations between men and women. As played out across

the lines of racial difference which organize the slave trade (with its ironically decorous “triangles and seas,” l. 25), such relations are typically violent and provide the broad context in which Dido’s own mother, Maria—“dead” (l. 22) or alive when the daughter is painted?—is implicitly located. While this shadowy figure may have enjoyed a relationship with Dido’s father which, in Byrne’s words, “was probably—though by no means certainly—loving and consensual” she may, equally, as Byrne also notes, have “endured the full horrors of capture in Africa and a transatlantic voyage [and] may well have been sexually assaulted—possibly more than once” (48) prior to Lindsay’s advent.¹⁰ It is therefore unsurprising that “We” (l. 17) should be enjoined to “Forget” this “history” (l. 15) of female enslavement and abuse, whose presence is ironically reanimated by the very linguistic gestures that would dispel it and whose worrisome traces are evident in the equivocations of how Dido is “dressed [...] with care” by her “uncle” (l. 24). This phrase suggests Mansfield’s mindful affection towards his great-niece, but hints also at Dido as a figure who, despite her outward appearance in the painting, is more fundamentally clad in suffering and grief that are unseen and unspoken. Dido is thus not just hidden by Mansfield in his “walled garden” (l. 26) but self-concealing: appropriately enough, as Reyahn King comments, she is clothed in “romantic garb of vague construction” which is “associated with masquerade dress” (33).

The danger Dido faces beyond the boundaries of her *hortus conclusus*—a space that is, like the poem’s extravagantly truncated sentences, at once sheltering and stifling—is finally twofold. By moving beyond those boundaries, she runs the risk of repeating not just the history that may or may not have befallen her enslaved mother but also the fate endured by her love-stricken classical namesake, who takes her own life after Aeneas abandons her in Book IV of Virgil’s *Aeneid* (88-89). Whether or not such a fate is a coding of what happens to Dido’s mother is purely speculative, but what is more certain is the way in which Jeffers ends her poem by rewriting her classical source. Here she both transforms the melodramas of heteronormative desire

into an illicit homoerotic intimacy between white girl and black and attempts (as does the painting) to fix it before it disintegrates:

Let her be.
Please.

No Dying Mythical Queen
weaving a vivid, troubled skin—

but Dido, full of girlhood,
and Elizabeth reaching

a hand. *Behave, cousin,*
she begs.

Don't run away from me. (ll. 27-35; italics in original)

The speaker's generalized exhortation that Dido's growth remain arrested at the stage of "girlhood" (l. 31) coincides in these lines with Elizabeth's plea that her "*cousin*" (l. 33) does not "*run away*" (l. 35) from her but "*Behave[s]*" (l. 33) herself by staying forever in place. The poem's final irony, however, resides in the formal alteration that befalls it at this juncture, as the couplets symbolizing the girls' togetherness throughout the text are suddenly disrupted by the ominous solitude of its last line.

Conclusion: Bigger Pictures

In a well-known essay, Adrienne Rich identifies the task of the female writer who finds herself faced with the male literary tradition as that of "Re-vision": it is, she states, a matter "of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction," adding that such an undertaking is not just "a chapter in cultural history" but "an act of survival" (18). Rich's remarks first appeared in 1972 and have become a staple of Anglo-American feminist criticism but can themselves be refreshed and reentered from a different angle—that of race rather than gender. Rich is not talking about ekphra-

sis here (though her language is overtly and interestingly visual) nor of course about the Middle Passage, but her comments have a curious resonance with the kinds of projects undertaken by Alexander, Senior, and Jeffers—or indeed, by implication, any Black Atlantic poet—as they confront a white visual culture which represents the black subject, whether enslaved or free, according to particular assumptions.

The task of looking back in order to renew that Rich outlines and that Alexander, Senior, and Jeffers take up in their own very different and much later context is also one which this essay has sought to perform by offering a fresh perspective on ekphrastic poetry of the Middle Passage as it has developed after “Turner.” One facet of the intellectual value attached to the type of inquiry the essay carries out derives from what it tells us about a complex body of material that has not been previously explored but its additional and broader worth resides in the balance it brings to critical work on the ekphrastic poem at large, directing attention to texts in which the author’s gaze is not white but black.

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Appendix

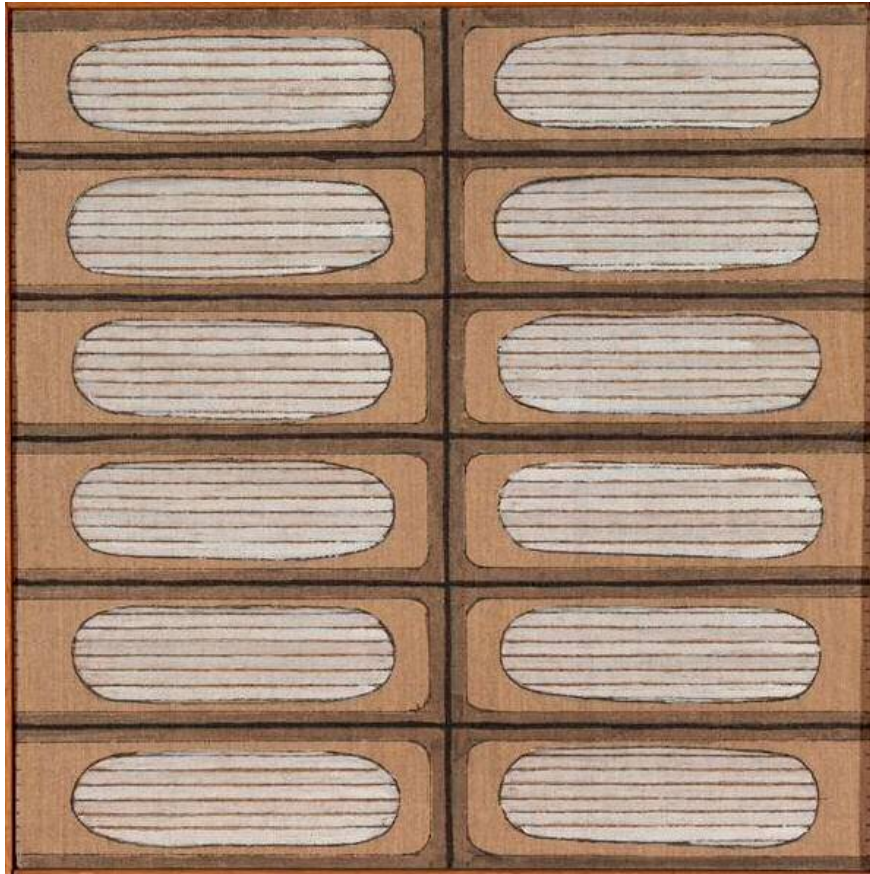


Figure 1. Agnes Martin, *Islands No. 4* (c. 1961). Oil on canvas, 37.8 cm x 37.8 cm (14 7/8 in x 14 7/8 in). Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of The Woodward Foundation. © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2015.

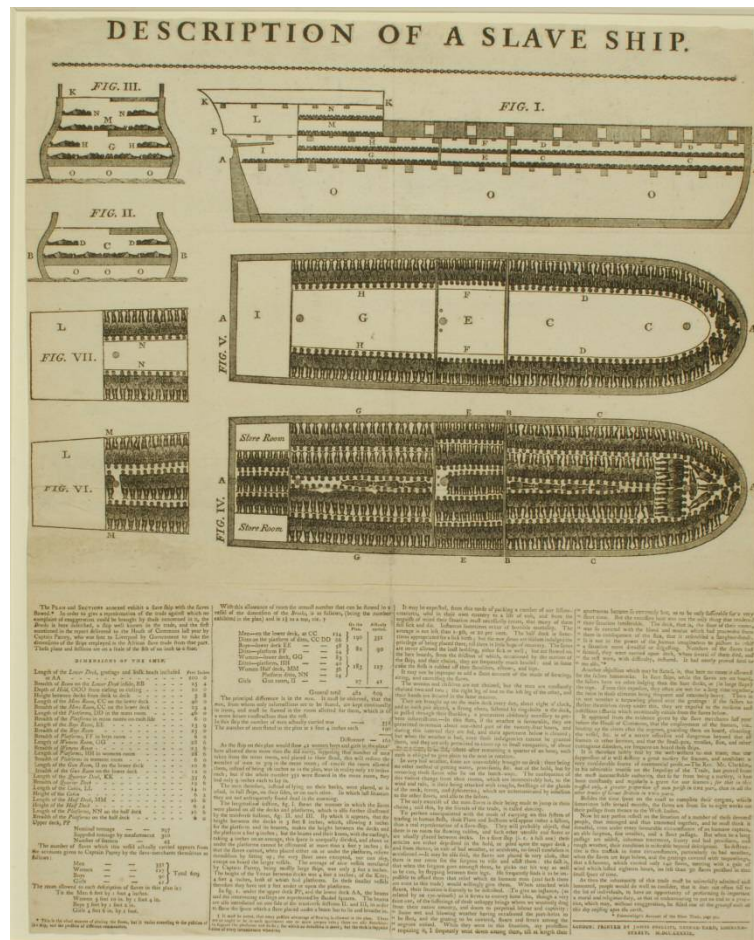


Figure 2. *Description of a Slave Ship* (1789). Woodcut. Princeton Rare Books Collection. Web. <https://blogs.princeton.edu/rarebooks/2008/05/219-years-ago-description-of-a/>.



Figure 4. Pierre Mignard, *Louise de Kéroualle, Duchess of Portsmouth* (1682). Oil on canvas, 12.07 cm x 9.53 cm (47 1/2 in x 37 1/2 in). National Portrait Gallery, purchased 1878. Primary Collection, NPG 497. © National Portrait Gallery, London. CC BY-NC-ND 3.0.

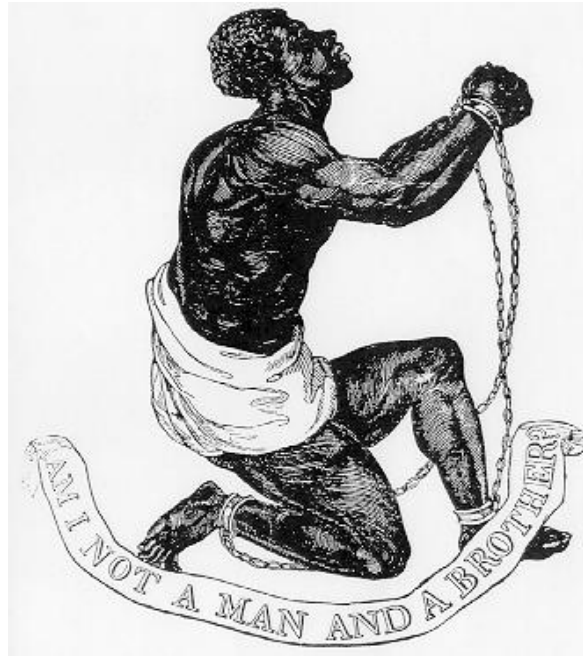


Figure 5. Josiah Wedgwood, *The Official Medallion of the British Anti-Slavery Society* (1795). Web. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AOfficial_medallion_of_the_British_Anti-Slavery_Society_\(1795\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AOfficial_medallion_of_the_British_Anti-Slavery_Society_(1795).jpg)



Figure 6. Unknown artist, *Portrait of Dido Elizabeth Belle and Lady Elizabeth Murray* (1779). Oil on canvas. Scone Palace, Perth. Web. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3ADido_Elizabeth_Belle.jpg.

NOTES

¹For two of the most notable critical responses to approach “Turner” along these lines see Härting and Wallart.

²In addition to the three poems on which this essay focuses, see Clarence Major’s “The Slave Trade: View from the Middle Passage” (1994), which engages with and critiques numerous European paintings of black subjects from the Renaissance to the abolitionist era, and Kwame Dawes’s *Requiem: A Lament for the Dead* (1996), a collection based on the haunting sequence of monochrome paintings comprising Tom Feelings’s *The Middle Passage: White Ships / Black Cargo* (1995). See also Douglas Kearney’s “**SWIMCHANT FOR NIGGER MER-FOLK (AN AQUABOOGIE SET IN LAPIS)**” (2011), and Robin Coste Lewis’s forthcoming *Voyage of the Sable Venus* (2015).

³For influential examples of this critical bias see Heffernan and Hollander, and for work which begins to challenge it by exploring instances of black ekphrasis, albeit still to a relatively limited degree, see both the chapter on Rita Dove in Loizeaux and the essay on the same poet in the collection edited by Hedley, Halpern and Spiegelman.

⁴For a comprehensive account of the evolution of the image of the *Brookes* and the role it played during the political debates of the abolitionist era, see Rediker 308-42.

⁵This is to be seen, for example, in the artwork for the books by Unsworth, Thomas, and Basker, respectively, the first of which is discussed in detail in Wood 35. The image of the *Brookes* has itself been widely reimagined since the late 1960s by several African American and Caribbean artists including Malcolm Bailey, Howardena Pindell, and Charles Campbell. For an excellent analysis of these reinterpretations, see Francis. Feelings (whom Francis curiously neglects to mention in her essay) also powerfully reworks the image in his *Middle Passage*, ironically incorporating the slave-containing ship within the chained but muscular body of a slave swimming across the Atlantic on his back (n. p.).

⁶As Srinivas Aravamudan observes, Mignard’s slave is a “page” in a literal as well as metaphorical sense, proving also, in this capacity, to be somewhat elusive. As the *OED* points out, the term implies a male identity (“page” *n.*¹, I.), but, as Aravamudan notes, the figure in “the Mignard image seems to be a girl (or is at least dressed as one)” (37).

⁷For a contemporary and somewhat satirical account of how the Duchess allegedly contracted this “malady” from Charles II, who subsequently sought to compensate her with the gift of a “pearl necklace, worth four thousand jacobus, and a diamond worth six thousand,” see Forneron 108.

⁸In figuring the Duchess’s sexual ailment in terms of “stigmata,” Senior’s poem again alludes to Harris’s essay, where limbo is strikingly seen as “emerg[ing] as a novel re-assembly out of the stigmata of the Middle Passage” (158).

⁹An additional element to the history behind the canvas is that Mansfield was at the centre of two of the most important legal cases in the period leading up to the

commencement of the abolitionist campaign in 1787. The first of these was that of the slave, James Somerset, which culminated in the so-called Mansfield Judgment that it was illegal for slave-masters forcibly to transport slaves back from England to the West Indies (Gerzina 116-20 and 124-32). The second case occurred in 1783 and arose out of the events aboard the *Zong* two years earlier, when the ship's Captain, Luke Collingwood, cast 132 African slaves into the sea in order that their owners could claim insurance on them as goods lawfully jettisoned. For a fully contextualized discussion of the *Zong* Massacre and its legal aftermath, see Walvin. It is these events, of course, that inspire Turner's painting.

¹⁰On the elusiveness of Dido's mother's history, see also Walters 131-32.

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